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Writing in the Transition Classroom: Results of an Effective Staff Development Plan

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Writing in the Transition Classroom:

Results of an Effective Staff Development Plan

Abstract

Writing samples from third grade classrooms in one site of the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project were examined using a process scoring scheme providing holistic, text-level, and sentence-level writing scores. The children in the Demonstration third grade classrooms (both Transition study and non-study children) made significant gains in writing when contrasted with children in the Comparison classrooms. The extensive staff development and curriculum modifications provided for teachers in the Transition schools over the four years of the project had a positive effect on the writing instruction for all children. The staff development program was an on-going process using modeling, practice, structured and open-ended feedback. Teacher use of a developmental continuum of process writing behaviors was the focus for follow-up staff development sessions. The extensive, "hands-on" staff development resulted in increased writing proficiency of the third grade children in these schools.

Third grade children from urban elementary schools in a Southern city wrote, rewrote, and edited stories using strategies designed to produce proficient writers. They were participants in the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project, a longitudinal study of the transition experience of Head Start children and their families in public schools in 30 sites across the country. This project followed two cohorts of Head Start children from kindergarten through third grade, half in Demonstration classrooms (all K-3 classrooms in three schools) and half in Comparison classrooms (all K-3 classrooms in four schools). The seven schools were randomly selected as Demonstration and Comparison sites. The children and families in the Demonstration group received "Head Start like" services (e.g., health care, social services, and family support) and the teachers received specialized training and support in the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms (Abbott-Shim, 1996; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Seefeldt, Vartuli, & Jewett, 1998). This article presents data from the National Transition Project's Alabama site, a collaborative effort of the Jefferson County Committee for Economic Opportunity (JCCEO) Head Start and the Birmingham Public Schools with Georgia State University as the evaluator.

The focus of the instruction in this Transition project was development and

implementation of a thematic language arts program using core books (fiction and non-fiction) to integrate instruction in reading, writing, oral communication, and content areas. Kindergarten and first grade teachers prepared 9-week thematic units with activities to develop literacy strategies such as concepts of print, story comprehension, phonemic awareness, prediction, and making sense of text. Second and third grade teachers analyzed their textbooks and state-mandated curriculum guides and regrouped them into 9-week topics which integrated reading, writing, and language with the content disciplines.

High quality children's literature was the springboard for literacy activities, including dramatizing, story re-telling, shared reading and writing, read alouds, and echo reading. To support this approach, all classrooms were stocked with a wide variety of books. Each classroom (kindergarten through third grade) received an allotment for new books and for equipment to reconfigure their classrooms. In the third grade classrooms, rather than establishing classroom libraries as was done at the other grade levels, the teachers opted to set up a third grade resource room in each Demonstration school with books from a wide variety of different genres, varying reading levels, and both single copies and sets of books. Two computers were available for each Demonstration classroom. All Demonstration teachers received staff development in writing and reading and attended the regional

Reading/Writing Conference each year. Teachers in the Comparison classrooms received the school system's regular allotment of books and supplies and could participate in any staff development offered by the school system for all teachers, including an optional workshop on writing offered to second grade teachers.

Staff Development

The Transition Project provided for staff development of all kindergarten through third grade teachers in the Demonstration schools. Teachers were unaware which children in their classrooms were actually Transition Demonstration subjects; therefore, their training was designed to encourage classroom changes that would affect all children, both study and non-study. The focus of the staff development was developmentally appropriate classroom practices designed to support a meaningful reading and writing program across the curriculum.

The implementation of the staff development model included instruction in theory and methods of instruction and assessment, demonstration teaching, coaching, modeling, and supervised practice. Formal training began with three days of staff development provided by the project curriculum coordinator and a consultant, followed by nine days of training scheduled throughout the school year. Substitutes were hired for all scheduled staff development days. The follow-up

sessions were held in kindergarten through third grade classrooms and featured demonstrations with the children, highlighting their growth in writing over the year. In addition, the project curriculum coordinator visited each classroom at least twice per month, more as needed. The activities for these visits were individualized by teacher and included observation, modeling, and coaching. The project curriculum coordinator also met frequently with grade level teams at each Demonstration school for sharing and discussion. The emphasis was on individual students and their progress in both reading and writing. Teams of teachers and staff development personnel analyzed students' progress and discussed possible instructional strategies for them. An important aspect of the teachers' growth was their learning to model developmentally appropriate writing processes for the children.

To give teachers a way of tracking growth over time, a developmental continuum of writing strategies and processes was adapted (*First Steps*, 1994) and used throughout the project. This gave teachers a way to track each student's progress in writing through the year and across grades. The continuum contains six phases from Role Play Writing to Advanced Writing. Indicators for each phase provide clear, behavioral descriptors of the child's writing organized into categories (content, organization and contextual understandings, concepts and

conventions, strategies, and attitude). Teachers were assisted in analyzing a child's writing using these indicators and planning instruction to assist the child in moving along the writing continuum.

In order to debrief and learn from the staff development experience, focus groups were held for the teachers to reflect on their staff development experiences over the past year. The teachers specifically identified demonstration lessons, on-site staff development, continuing support throughout the year, supportive materials, and the expertise and experience of the trainers as factors in making the staff development successful. These activities, they reported, made them more aware of the needs of their students and more willing to collaborate with colleagues. They were also key to the actual implementation the staff development suggestions in their classrooms.

Writing Program

The writing program implemented was an adaptation of *First Steps* (1994), a language arts program from Western Australia. It includes reading, writing, spelling, and oral language and features a developmental continuum for each component. This observational tool allows teachers to chart a student's individual growth and progress in each language arts area. The accompanying manuals provide suggestions for teachers to use in supporting students' growth.

In the third grade, students wrote at least three times per week. Some teachers used a writing workshop format, others gave writing assignments using all aspects of the curriculum. In kindergarten and first grade, writing was a daily activity, also using the *First Steps* program. Each year students took their "published" writing to the local Young Authors Conference.

Teacher Qualifications and Attitudes toward Literacy

Data were available on the teachers' education (degree and major), certification, and teaching experience. In considering all teachers in the seven schools across grade levels, Comparison teachers were more likely to have only a bachelors degree than were Demonstration teachers ($\chi^2 = 6.461$, $p = .040$), but there was no difference in their years of teaching experience. Third grade teachers were more likely to have a degree in elementary education while kindergarten teachers were more likely to have a degree in early childhood education ($\chi^2 = 27.869$, $p = .000$). Demonstration third grade teachers were significantly more likely to have a masters degree than were Comparison teachers ($\chi^2 = 4.320$, $p = .038$). Also, Demonstration third grade teachers had significantly more years of teaching experience than Comparison teachers ($F = 5.593$, $p = .026$).

Each year of the project, classrooms were assessed for developmentally appropriate practices using the *Assessment Profile for Early Childhood Programs*.

Research Version (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1992). Seven items on this instrument assess the literacy environment of the classroom; for example, displaying written language in the room, encouraging children's written communication, use of dictation to record the child's language, and use of a system for assessing the children's language and literacy development and using that information to design instructional activities. Scores on these seven items were aggregated and compared. Demonstration third grade classrooms were found to have significantly higher scores on these items than Comparison classrooms ($t = 2.885$, $p = .008$), suggesting that Demonstration teachers were providing a richer language and literacy learning environment for their students.

All Demonstration and Comparison teachers in the Transition project were interviewed about their experiences at the conclusion of their involvement in the project. Most of the kindergarten, first and second grade Demonstration teachers (56%) stated that the most successful activities within the education component of the project were the staff development, the additional instructional materials, and their involvement in curriculum writing. Third grade Demonstration teachers, who were involved with the project staff development activities for a shorter time than the other teachers, were somewhat less likely (43%) to mention these components. Comparison teachers lacked enthusiasm in naming successful activities and were

somewhat negative in their responses.

Writing Assessment

In the third grade all children (Demonstration and Comparison) were given a writing assessment. They were all asked to respond to the prompt:

Think about a special time when you had lots of fun.

Tell the story of what happened.

The task was administered to each classroom group by the classroom teacher and was untimed. The writing samples were scored by an independent measurement contractor in another state, using a process scoring guide developed by the Illinois State Board of Education (1994). These aspects of the child's writing were assessed:

Text-level Features

- Focus–the clarity with which a paper presents and maintains a clear main idea, point of view, theme, or unifying event.
- Support/Elaboration–the degree to which the main point or event is elaborated and explained by specific details and reasons.
- Organization–the clarity of the logical flow of ideas and the explicitness of the text structure or plan.

Sentence-level Feature

- Conventions–use of standard written English.

Holistic Feature

- Integration–evaluation of the paper based on a focused, global judgement of how effectively the paper as a whole uses basic features to address the essay assignment.

Scoring was on a six-point scale interpreted as follows:

1 - 3 indicates that the feature is absent or in the developing stages.

4 - 6 indicates that the feature is basically or well-developed.

Other Literacy Measures

Each year of the Transition project, study children were given the Reading and Mathematics portions of the *Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised (1990)* and the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised* (PPVT) (1981). Rasch-Wright (W-ability) scores were calculated so the data could be examined to estimate children's growth in reading, mathematics, and language development.

Results

Since the Writing sample was collected from all third grade children in each classroom, it was possible to look at differences between Transition Demonstration versus Comparison classrooms to measure the effect of the Transition teacher staff development training on the children's writing progress, regardless of whether or not the children and their families had received Transition services over the past four years. Table 1 presents these data. All of the scale scores of the Transition Demonstration classroom students were significantly higher than those of the

Comparison classroom students. The mean Holistic and Text-level scores for both groups ranged from 2.7 to 3.5, the upper edge of the score range 1-3 which indicates that the children's writing is developing as expected. Both groups had a few children whose compositions were judged to be well developed, although there were not a lot for either group (see Figure 1). Although the Demonstration group's Sentence-level scores were significantly higher than those of the Comparison group, the distributions both were non-normal. The average score for both groups was score level 1 and no child in either group scored above a 2. Neither group showed progress toward using standard English conventions in their writing.

Table 2 presents the results for the Transition Demonstration and Comparison study children in third grade on the Woodcock-Johnson Reading composite and the PPVT. There were no significant differences between the groups on the Reading composite score (Letter-Word Recognition and Passage Comprehension). The Transition Demonstration group's PPVT W-ability scores were significantly higher than the Comparison group's scores.

Because of this difference in PPVT scores, an analysis of covariance was used to compare the process scores for the writing sample for the Transition Demonstration and Comparison study children (see Table 3). With the PPVT as

the covariate, there was no difference between the Transition Demonstration and Comparison study children on their writing scores.

Discussion

The classroom teachers in the Transition Demonstration schools received a substantial amount of staff development and classroom follow-up over the four years of the project. Much of it centered on developmentally appropriate practices in the primary grade classroom, helping the teachers to move away from subject-centered, textbook-centered instruction toward theme-based, integrated instruction. Process writing instruction was a major focus of the training, especially during the last year of the project. The teachers understood the importance of process writing in the development of the child's literacy and provided regular time for writing in the classroom. They also consistently used the developmental continuum to assess children's writing and plan instructional strategies. It appears that this curricular emphasis was effective as the children in these classrooms wrote compositions that were judged to be more well-developed and integrated than those written by children whose classrooms had not had this emphasis. However, neither group used standard written English conventions in their compositions. This may be due to the emphasis teachers placed on writing as communication (process) with a de-emphasis on editing their writing. It is also, no

doubt, a reflection of the children's oral English suggesting that they write as they speak

Teacher Effects. The finding that all children in the Transition classrooms demonstrated more effective writing strategies regardless of whether they were study subjects or not strongly supports a focus on the teacher rather than the child Providing extensive staff development and support for kindergarten and primary grade teachers in process writing, literature-based literacy instruction, developmentally appropriate organization and instruction, and individual assessment of writing benefitted the entire class Key to the success was implementation of the developmental continuum of writing This instrument assisted the teachers in focusing on individual children and their progress A quick check provided insight into the child's progress (or lack of progress) and gave teachers a basis for encouraging, instructing, and engaging the child on an appropriate strategy

The staff development model used in this program employs many of the principles of effective staff development highlighted in the literature–modeling, practice, structured and open-ended feedback, coaching, and theory combined with practice (Joyce & Showers, 1980) Research on improving writing instruction through staff development (Pisano & Tallerico, 1990) suggests three underlying

assumptions for a successful program, all of which were met in the Transition staff development: knowledge of the new content, trust in the resource person, and time to practice the new methodology in their classrooms (p. 18). This research also suggests that trainers should expect incremental rather than immediate progress (p. 20). Therefore, staff development needs to be on-going over a period of months or years, not a one time offering. In the Transition project, teachers had four years of staff development in developmentally appropriate practice with an intensive final year in writing. This contrasts greatly from the "expert-of-the month" model often used in educational staff development in which unrelated topics are presented once by an outsider with no classroom follow-up (Schweinhart, Epstein, Okoloko, Oden, & Florian, 1998, p. 7). Schweinhart, et al. found that staff development was most likely to be effective when it included "curriculum-centered training, hands-on learning experiences, classroom observation and feedback to teachers, and continuity and follow-up by a consistent trainer" (p. 7). All these were components of the this Transition staff development.

The more mature writing exhibited by children in the Transition classrooms was, no doubt, a cumulative effect of all the years of the project. These teachers were in a supportive context for change and were given consistent human as well

as material resources to effect the change, both ingredients for successful staff development (Pisano & Tallerico, p. 21). The decision to provide staff development to all grade level teachers in the Transition schools helped to provide a grade-level wide context for change and allowed for peer support and coaching, other important ingredients for writing staff development (Weber, 1988; Johnston & Wilder, 1992)

The fact that the Demonstration third grade classroom teachers were more likely to have an advanced degree and had had more years of teaching experience should also be noted. These differences may have made them more open to the Transition staff development program increasing the likelihood that they would implement the practices introduced and would provide a more developmentally appropriate language and literacy environment for the students.

While such staff development activities may require additional funding, they are not as expensive as providing services to individual children and families. The significant gains in these urban children's writing strategies reflect their classroom teachers' approach, attitude, and expertise.

Conclusion

Analysis of the longitudinal data for the children in this Transition Demonstration Project shows no significant gains for the Demonstration children

in Woodcock-Johnson Reading scores. It does indicate, however, that all children in the Demonstration third grade classrooms (both Transition study and non-study children) made significant gains in writing when contrasted with children in the Comparison classrooms. The extensive staff development and curriculum modifications provided for teachers in the Transition schools over the four years of the project appear to have been successful. An important implication of this finding is that, for a relatively modest sum, staff development can be provided to help teachers reorganize their classrooms to provide developmentally appropriate instruction that makes a difference in the writing of their students.

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Table 1

Writing Sample Scores for Third Grade Transition Demonstration and Comparison Classrooms (Study & Non-study Children)

	Demonstration n = 381		Comparison n = 447			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	p
Text-level Focus	3.3780	.8997	3.0268	.8980	5.602	.000***
Text-level Support	3.2152	.9095	2.8725	.8333	5.616	.000***
Text-level Organization	3.2730	.8516	2.664	.8712	5.108	.000***
Sentence-level Conventions	1.4619	.4992	1.3154	.4652	4.342	.000***
Holistic Judgement	3.0105	.7181	2.7175	.6332	6.174	.000***

Table 2

Woodcock-Johnson & Peabody Picture Vocabulary Rasch-Wright Scores for Third Grade Transition Study Children

	Demonstration n = 127		Comparison n = 52			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	p
WJ Reading	480.3937	19.5489	480.1923	13.8125	.078	n.s.
PPVT	97.9221	8.2662	94.2187	5.6045	2.962	.003***

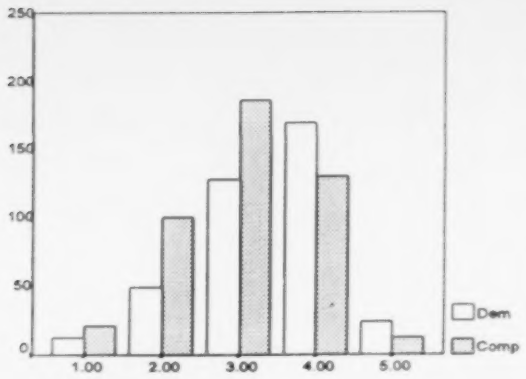
Table 3

Analysis of Covariance of Third Grade Study Children's Writing Scores with PPVT as Covariate (N = 178)

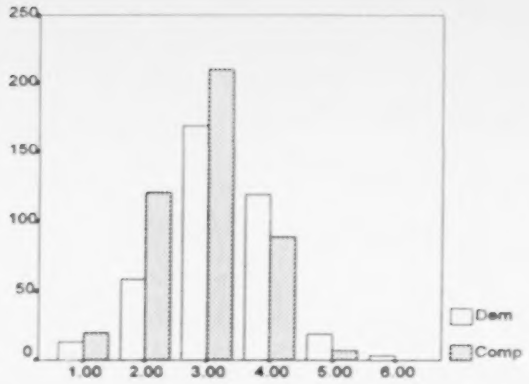
	SS	DF	MS	F	p
Within	73.49	176	.42		
Covariate (PPVT)	4.27	1	4.27	10.23	.002***
Between groups (Writing)	.79	1	.79	1.89	.171

Figure 1

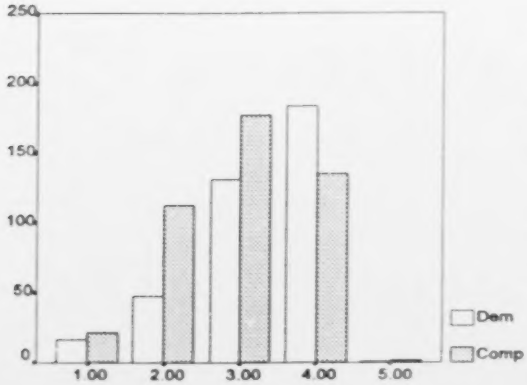
Writing Score Distributions for Third Grade Demonstration and Comparison Classrooms



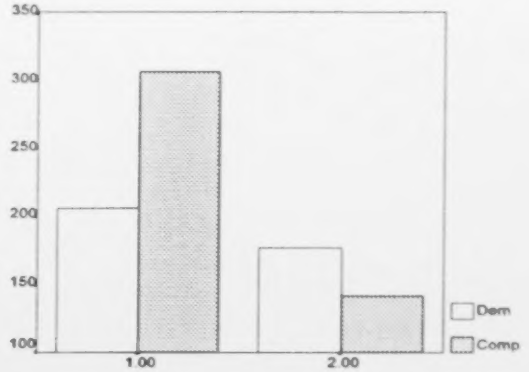
Text-Level Focus Score



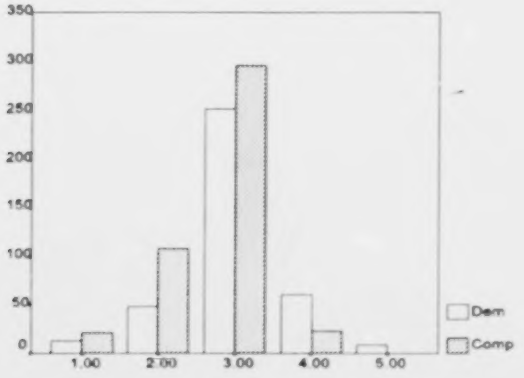
Text-Level Support Score



Text-Level Organization Score



Sentence-Level Standard English Score



Holistic Judgement of Paper Score

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